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AUTHOR Reynoso, Wendy Demko
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ABSTRACT

In teaching standard English to non-native students or students with different dialects, teachers must gain the students' trust by demonstrating an egalitarian attitude toward all dialects, and by explaining that the acquisition of a new dialect does not require rejection of the old one. Also, in order to teach written English effectively to non-native speakers and speakers of different American English dialects, teachers must understand the most common areas of divergence between standard and non-standard English, thereby enabling them to diagnose, identify and prescribe solutions for student errors. By assigning diagnostic essays, teachers can identify students' abilities and note the specific features that need adjustment. First, students are divided into two categories: English as a second language/dialect different (ESL/DD), and basic writers. Writing can then be taught as a four stage process: prewriting, writing, rewriting, and proofreading. Basic writers concentrate on immersing themselves in standard written English (newspapers, magazines, novels) and reciting passages of standard English while listening to the syntax. ESL/DD students also read, recite, transcribe and memorize, but with a focus on specific grammar points, such as the use of articles and prepositions, word endings, and word inflections. Students record the types of errors made in their essay, which reinforces the concept of proofreading, and provides them with a progress chart for each essay. (A handout on common areas of divergence, a progress chart, and recommended student readings are appended.) (MM)

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# Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians in the English Classroom: A Linguistic Approach to a Problem

A Presentation Made to the 77th Annual Convention of the National Council of Teachers of English

November 1987

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by
Wendy Demko Reynoso

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My name is Wendy Demko Reynoso, and I have been teaching applied linguistics at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo for almost six years. While I teach the three classes that I conceived for the English Department, my employer is actually the Student Affairs Division, which falls under the Dean of Students. My department is Student Academic Services, a department that administers the Educational Opportunity Program, the Minority Engineering Program, Special Services for the Disadvantaged, and Upward Bound. Essentially, the department is there to assist in the access, retention, and graduation of "non-traditional" or "underrepresented" students, students who by and large are often classified as ESL (English as a second language) or DD (dialect different).

The title of my presentation on this panel is "Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians in the English Classroom: A Linguistic Approach to a Problem." But as a preface to my remarks, I'd first like to say something that I'm sure most of you can relate to, and that is that I love my job. I'm convinced that I was destined for this kind of work. I think back to when I was in high school, a senior. My best friend's family was from Poland and her grandmother lived with her. When Jan was out and her grandmother answered the phone, the most she would say was, "Jenny no home." If I asked <u>when</u> Jan would be back, I'd simply get a click. One day I called when Jan was out and got the usual, "Jenny no home." Without really intending to, just following my natural impulse, I asked, "When Jenny comin' home?" There was a pause, then the response, "Jenny be home 4 'clock." My eyes widened; "4 'clock?" I asked. "Yes, 4 'clock." "Thank you," I said, ecstatic over my accomplishment! From that day on, I was the only one of Jan's friends that her grandmother would talk to.

So what is the point of this story? The point is NOT that to communicate with speakers of nonstandard English, one must become proficient in nonstandard English. That was the misconceived media claim in the Ann Arbor case almost ten years ago. That all English teachers and educators must learn the nonstandard dialects of all their students was not the point in Michigan, and it is not the point here. I had no training in nonstandard dialects back then in high school. But I had an ear for language. I was linguistically attentive, and with that I was able to elicit Jan's grandmother's trust. Until I elicited her trust, she had nothing to share with me, no words to communicate. But by being sensitive and responding to her in her own cadence and in her terms, I was able to break through the affective barrier of distrust and talk with her. In my view, this is the first step in teaching standard English to ESL/DD students: gaining students' trust.

As English teachers, I'm sure everyone in this room is aware of how powerful language is. But, especially with regard to the ESL/DD, we must be equally aware of how personal it is. Language, dialect, is just as much an expression of self as is one's hair-cut, dress, posture, demeanor. When a person's language is criticized, the very essence of that person is criticized. No one wants to be told to reject some aspect of himself or herself. Yet by virtue of being their English teacher, that is precisely what many students expect when they enter my classroom. My job, then, is to dispel that impression. One of the first concepts I introduce in my classes is the idea of the inherent equality of all dialects. I try to explain to students that acquisition of a new dialect does not require rejection of the old one, that there are appropriate times and places for each.

Excerpts from The Color Purple offer a wonderful example of this. Had Celie's story been written in the "correct" or standard form, it simply would not have been as good.

Moreover, to gain students' trust, I must possess an egalitarian attitude toward different dialects, and I must be able to persuade students that, as their English teacher, I am not denigrating them, their culture, or their language. I am simply offering them access to another dialect of English--a dialect that rightly or wrongly carries with it a certain amount of economic mobility.

In addition to attitude, other key factors necessary in eliciting students' trust include: being warm and friendly; having an honest desire to communicate with students; genuinely caring about what they write about to the extent that I try to figure it out if the meaning is obscure; and finally paying close attention to their language, or--developing linguistic attentiveness.

In my presentation here today, I will describe how I have structured the classes I teach around what I have learned from my own linguistic attentiveness. My hope is that, after hearing this presentation, those of you in the audience will become a little more adept at recognizing and alerting students to certain patterns in their writing. My approach is individualized, but it is not unwieldy, once the most common areas of divergence between standard and nonstandard written English are clearly understood. Indeed, such understanding opens the way for the kind of "error analysis" and viewing of errors as manifestations of logic and linguistic expertise that Mina Shaughnessy so articulately called for. Whether or not the ESL/DD students are basic writers, the approach remains the same: diagnose, identify, prescribe.

On the first day of class, I assign an in-class, diagnostic essay which requires students to write in the present, past, and future tense using the third person singular. Such an assignment might read: "Discuss one of the goals you have for yourself. How and when did you acquire this goal? What specific measures are you taking to achieve it? When is your target date for accomplishing your goal, or is it on-going? And finally, how will you measure your eventual success or failure? Compose this essay in the third person. This means you will write about yourself as if you were someone else. Ex: ' Sam's goal is to... ' (Not: 'My goal is to ...') Use your first name and the pronouns _he_ or _she_, _her_ or _his_, etc."

This assignment will measure students' control of third person singular -s, tense marker -ed, and future tense using _will_ and the base form of the verb. When evaluating the essays, I keep a record of my assessment of each student's essay. I note if the student appears to be ESL/DD, a basic writer, or both. With regard to dialect different students, some "experts" (who in my view should know better) assume that all dialect different students are primary oral people. This is simply not so. Not all ESL students and not all dialect different students are basic writers. I distinguish between the two as follows. Basic writers are generally nonreaders who have a great deal of difficulty with the syntax of standard written English. Such a student might write, "These neighbors who had nothing in common nor did they understand which each others way of life was different." ESL/DD students, on the contrary, may be quite well read, but their language is peppered with errors in

specific aspects of standard English. In other words, their errors are largely systematic and predictable, not arbitrary. Such a student might write, "One of the most thrill incident of my life occur on very festive day."

As you can see from the handout entitled "Common Areas of Divergence Between Standard and Nonstandard Written English," some of these forms might be mistaken for arbitrary syntactic errors, when in actuality they aren't. Simply, they show the trained eye that the student is operating from a different grammar base. An example would be the Spanish speaking student who would write, "I need to studied now." This student is demonstrating expertise in the Spanish linguistic system which inflects the stem of the verb to create an infinitive. Unfortunately for the student, standard English doesn't inflect infinitives in this way.

I think back to the student who signed a letter to his girlfriend, "I loves you baby." I can't tell this student that it is more logical to add an -s to the third person singular than to the first person singular. It isn't! And I remember the student who read The Immigrants by Howard Fast (a book students love). In referring to the World War I Lusitania incident, the student wrote, "The ship sunk the Germans." The ship sunk the Germans? No, that's not what happened; the Germans sank the ship! A history teacher might think that the student had not done his or her homework; in reality, it's simply a matter of the student's dialect not including variant forms of a state of being verb or prepositions. The errors in terms of standard English are copula absence: "The ship was sunk" (and it's interesting to note that the student did use the past participle "sunk" not "sank") and omission

of the preposition: "by the Germans." I wouldn't expect a history teacher to be able to figure that out, but as that student's English teacher, it is up to me to point out how reliance on the grammar of a nonstandard dialect can result in complete misunderstanding of the intended meaning.

After identifying students as ESL/DD, basic writers, or both (and many are both), the next step is prescription: noting on my record sheet and on the student's paper the specific features that that student needs to begin proofreading for. If the first day of class is taken up with the diagnostic essay, the next few days are spent reviewing the four stages of the writing process: prewriting, writing, rewriting, proofreading. While proofreading may be the least significant stage of the process in terms of actually composing, it is nonetheless critical to the success and effectiveness of the final product. Discussion of proofreading paves the way for discussion of nonstandard dialects of English. At this point, I give students the "Areas of Divergence" handout, discuss the different areas, and then I offer the argument made by some lexocentrists that standard English is superior to nonstandard dialects that don't incorporate variant forms of the verb to be. I tell students that I'd like to ask those individuals if Spanish then is superior to standard English since it possesses two forms of the verb to be: ser and estar. Of course, the Spanish speaking students love this comparison; many of them have never contemplated the two forms of the verb in Spanish.

I made the comment earlier that it is important to identify the student as a basic writer, or as ESL/DD, or as both. The distinction is important because the prescription is a little different. Basic writers need to immerse themselves in standard written English. They need to read more: newspapers, magazines, textbooks, novels. I agree with the person who said, "Any book a nonreader reads is a good book." I assign a book if I think it's a good yarn, not if it's "good literature."

Moreover, basic writers need to read more; they need to recite passages of standard English, listening to the syntax. They need to transcribe passages of standard English and memorize passages of standard English--all the while heeding the syntax. ESL/DD students also need to read, recite, transcribe, and memorize, but their focus is not so much on the syntax of the sentences as on the endings of the words, the inflections, as well as the uses of the verb <u>to be</u>, the articles, prepositions, and pronouns, depending on the findings from the first diagnostic essay and subsequent essays thereafter.

I give students progress charts with which they keep a record of the kinds of errors found in each essay they write. This reinforces the idea of categories of errors or patterns in their writing that they must look for when proofreading. After recording the errors on their progress charts, students then recopy the essay making the necessary corrections.

In the final analysis, basic writers and ESL/DD students improve their control of standard written English in the same way that everyone else does: through reading, writing, and getting criticism of that

writing. The focus of the reading may vary a little and the focus of the criticism too should vary since an absent plural-s, tense marker -ed, article, etc., of an ESL/DD student probably amounts to more than the skip or miss of a basic writer.

Because my classes are applied linguistics classes, most of the work students do outside class is reading, one hundred to two hundred pages a week. Most of the writing they do is in class, once a week responding to an essay question based on their reading. This does mean that students are not getting the benefit of engaging in all aspects of the writing process, in particular, revision--where writing becomes art. But my rationale is that other English classes, composition classes, focus on that aspect of writing. My sense is that basic writers and ESL/DD students simply need to do more reading.

I recently encountered a Vietnamese student who had been in ESL classes for years and had never read a novel. I was flabbergasted; how can someone be expected to produce standard written English without reading it? I agree wholeheartedly with the person who said, "You can read without writing, but you can't write without reading." Reading gives writers so much more than passive acquisition of the language. It gives them experiences outside the narrow confines of their own lives. It gives them ideas and feelings and incidents to think about and write about. And yet as I have tried to show here, for the ESL/DD student, reading alone is not enough.

I have a friend teaching English in Japan who maintains that all one has to do is assign students reading and they'll acquire the language. I differ with him only to the extent that a massive dose of reading is

not enough. The students who systematically neglect to include the third person singular -s will probably never notice the disparity between an author's conjugation and their own until it is pointed out to them. The need for a trained critic then becomes all the more important for ESL/DD students.

In summary, my advice to the instructor of Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians who are basic writers or who are ESL/DD is this:

1. Teach writing as a four stage process. When discussing the final stage of the process, proofreading, discuss standard English as one dialect of English and introduce the common areas of divergence between it and the nonstandard forms. Develop exercises to help students look at their own writing in terms of the code, not just the content.
2. Use progress charts to help students become aware of the conventions of their dialect in contrast to the conventions of standard English.
3. Require more reading, much more reading, and more transcription, and more memorization of prose.
4. And finally, my last bit of advice brings us back to the affective domain where we began. That is: Go easy on yourself. Don't expect miracles. Don't expect students to reverse the linguistic habits of a lifetime in ten weeks. As with any subject matter, one must remember the giant gulf that often exists between what is learned and what is taught. If the students in your classes have discovered pleasure in reading and fascination with language, then in my view you have accomplished much.

## Common Areas of Divergence

## Between Standard and Nonstandard Written English

as noted by
Wendy Demko Reynoso

**Inflections**

| | |
|---|---|
| Plural -s omission: | The police reported that three identification of the suspect were made. |
| Plural -s inclusion: | Some identifications will be required if you attempt to order alcohol. |
| Third person singular -s: | He ask me the same question everyday. |
| Tense marker -ed: | We study for four hours last night. |
| Linking verb + past participle: | We were tire after hiking all day. (Other linking verbs: appear, become, feel, grow, look, remain, seem, smell, sound, stay, taste.) |
| Participial marker: | A love mother gives her child attention and a love child usually feels secure. |
| Perfect tense: | I have ask you three times now. |
| Progressive tense: | I am tell you not to go with them. |
| Base form of verb required: | We didn't studied very much. (Also do, does, can, could, shall, should, may, might.) |
| Inflected future tense: | I will asked you one more time and that's it. |
| Inflected infinitive: | We are telling you to asked them now. |
| Possessive marker: | This is John parent home; he pays them rent. |

## Articles

| | |
|---|---|
| Article omission: | We wrote ~~~~ essay yesterday. (an) |
| Article inclusion: | We did ~~a~~ drillwork daily, but it didn't help. |
| Definite/indefinite reference: | Once upon a time, a princess kissed the (a) frog and ~~a~~ (the) frog became a prince. |
| Vowel succession: | She is ~~a~~ (an) honorable woman. |
| **Copula Absence**: | He (is) scared because he knows he (is) taking too many units. |
| **Prepositions**: | He is ~~in~~ (on) the tennis team and his parents are proud ~~~~ (of) him. |
| **Pronominal Omission**: | I enjoy school, but ~~~~ (it) is difficult. |
| **Common Spelling Rules**: | They refered (r) us to the adviseing (e) center for help with our studys (ies). |
| **Commonly Confused Words**: | Been (im) all alone in the house, they locked the doors because they ~~where~~ (were) afraid. |

P R O G R E S S  C H A R T

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Recommended authors and/or works for student reading:

Maya Angelou
Empire of the Sun, Ballard
Shogun (and others in the series), Clavell
The Immigrants (and others in the series), Fast
The Good Conscience, Fuentes
Judith Guest
Our House in the Last World, Hijuelos
Farewell to Manzanar, Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston
Larry McMurtry
Toni Morrison
Milagro Beanfield War (and others in series), Nichols
Island of the Blue Dolphins, O'Dell
Cry, the Beloved Country, Paton
Hunger of Memory, Rodriguez
Joyce Carol Thomas
Alice Walker
A Long Way from Home, Wartski

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